

End of Days

The winter of 2017/18 was when the end began. Bob knew his time was growing short. Still, there was so much he wanted to show me, teach me and tell me. Bob fought hard and rested a lot. In late fall of 2017, it was our last trip to the Cady Mountains in Ludlow, CA. We knew it would be our last. On our way there he had lost bowel control in the truck. While hidden from passing cars, I helped him change clothes. I kept saying, “it’s OK, it’s OK,” but he knew it wasn’t. Bob’s legs wouldn’t support him any longer. He just sat and watched me wander off with buckets to collect rocks. He’d look over the rocks I collected, often snorting at my preference to “pretty vs. functional”.

We rented one of the rooms at the Ludlow Motel. I didn’t want it to be sad, so I teased and snuggled and rubbed his back. I brought him dinner from either the truck stop or the Ludlow Café. We watched TV and railed against President Trump; but it wasn’t the same. He was exhausted by the time we got home, so he slept – sometimes for 24 hours at a time.

Then he began bleeding...from both ends. One morning I awoke, came out to the living room to greet Bob and discovered him sitting in his blue walker, with a fair-sized puddle of blood at his feet. He had jammed his toe with the walker’s wheel and broke open a blister on his foot. The blood thinner he was taking let it bleed longer than normal. A couple of weeks later his nose began to bleed, and it too was hard to stop. I took him into the VA’s ER, and they jammed gauze up the offending nostril and sent him home. He was miserable and couldn’t sleep without breathing concerns.



Bob was afraid. I could hear it when he would rant about not living at a lower altitude or not having a dog to comfort him. Sometimes he clearly made me the scapegoat for his failing health. I stayed still and quiet, offering a calming back rub as consolation. All I could really do was be there beside him, holding his hand, fuss over him and love him. We'd snuggle and play when he felt well enough, but never as he really wanted: time and circumstance robbed him of those pleasures.

On March 1st, 2018, we celebrated our 2nd wedding anniversary. I promised to get him "down the hill," elevation wise. I booked a few nights in Wickenburg, and it was not cheap. We located a gold miners shop in a prospector's extra-large garage. Several visiting men were "regulars" and hung around the store to visit and gab. Bob was in his element and talked and talked and talked! Perhaps to the point of no return.....lung wise.

We were due to leave Wickenburg the following morning, but Bob just couldn't wake up. When he came too, another minor bowel accident caused a motel chair cushion to be soiled. Bob had me request a late check-out (2 hours late), because he didn't feel good at all. Pleading for the extra time; and confessing the soiled chair cushion; brought only welcome assurances, 'everything was OK,' from the motel staff – God Bless Them!

It took several days before Bob could feel ½ way 'normal'. He consistently experienced pain. The morphine would only take the edge off his pain, never suppress it. I have many pictures of him curled into a fetal position and zonked out. A lot of times he just couldn't get comfortable, and an anxiety attack would come on. I'd bring him morphine or a small "Hopi holy water," screwdriver. Always he'd appreciate my gentle, slow back rubs.

The horrors of war never left Bob. Nighttime was the worst for him. When he felt well enough, he would join me in bed at night. Yet he couldn't relax too long in a dark silent room. His claustrophobia would cause him to fuss and fidget - sadly excusing himself to the living room. I'd get up with him, get a trazadone pill and cold drink for him, then sit with him for a while in front of the TV. His hearing was bad, so the TV had to be very loud. (I finally bought some "TV ears" which were a blessing!) Lights had to be on too. So, I'd get him settled, hold his hand or rub his shoulders. Eventually I would take my leave back to bed. By morning he was sleeping soundly, TV ears still on his head.

By the end of March Bob expected to go back into the VA's Community Living Center (CLC) for a 'tune-up/respite'. I would use the time to tackle spring cleaning chores. But a couple of days before the scheduled respite, Bob didn't feel good at all. He slept all day. I couldn't get him to eat, drink or take his pills. By late afternoon I was getting worried. I took his temperature and found it was 101.7. I roused him enough to tell him I was calling for help to get him to the VA's Emergency Room. He didn't argue.

Ambulance and Fire Fighters arrived, bundled Bob up and headed for the VA. Once there, it took several hours and blood tests to determine his blood oxygen was way, way low. So, he was put on a CPAP oxygen mask at level 10 (he was routinely on level 6 at home). Eventually Bob was admitted and wheeled upstairs to the 3rd floor. I stayed while he settled in, then headed home around 2am. I assured him I'd be back in the morning. As I stepped outside the VA, into the silent, cool night air – I heard the hoot of an owl....

Before going into Bob's room the next morning, I was stopped by a nurse and an older lady doctor. The doctor had already spoken to Bob, and I was told that this was not going well for him, and he likely would not be going home.

I expect my flushed face, knot in my throat and welling tears paled in comparison - to Bob's expression when the doctor told him the mortal circumstance of his health. The hugs of consolation by the nurse and doctor couldn't quench the dull, numb terror I felt.

Holding Bob's hand, he moaned sadly through the CPAP mask, "I'm not gonna make it..." With tears I responded, "I'll catch up..." "I know you will..." he mumbled. That's all we said about it. I snuggled into his shoulder.

Bob wanted another 24 hours on the 3rd floor to "come back to life", before having to relegate himself to Hero's Way on CLC - also known as 'death row'.

He slept a lot that day but did rebound briefly – as if a light switch came on inside him. He went off CPAP, and was hungry enough to want lunch of jello, sherbet and juice. However, the next 24 hours had no improvement. Dr. Jelnik (Bob's long-term acquaintance) took over his care and told him the next step was hospice. She promised to spoil him rotten while he was there. So off to death row Bob went...

Bob's tough old gray Toyota Tundra dutifully carried me 60 miles round trip, twice a day, to be with him. Most of the time Bob was sedated heavily, and it was a struggle to get him to eat or drink. The first couple of days confounded the nurses, whereas the amount of pain killers they gave Bob did little or no good at all. He'd take them like 'skittles,' remarked one nurse. Bob had a catheter inserted, but he still pleaded to stand so he could pee. I'd hold him up, but his legs wouldn't support him any longer. The bed alarm would sound, and the nurses would come running.

Saturday night was bath night. A type of personal 'cherry picker' contraption was wheeled over the patient in bed. Bob was 'trussed up', lifted, and then wheeled into the spa/Jacuzzi room.

There he was dunked into the tub while still ensconced in the 'cherry picker'. While a small group managed Bob's bath, another nurse changed the linens on his bed. Once settled back in bed and hit with another dose of pain meds, Bob zonked out for several hours.

Early in his stay Bob told me he could sense I was there with him, even while under heavy sedation. I would stay with him, hold his hand, stroke his arm or lay my head on the bedrail. I'd watch the suspended TV on a swing arm, and had it set to Turner Classics. Black and white movies from the last century, with no commercials. Movies from when Bob was a young man: not that he ever saw many movies until he went into the Army in 1948.

While I could snack on the fast food available in the family lounge, Bob was kept constantly sedated. No food or water was given (not even by I.V.). I frequently put Chap Stick on his lips. I'd also try to swab his mouth with some water, as I realized he was being allowed to die from thirst.... The bag that collected his urine had a cover put over it, to hide the ever-darkening urine that trickled in. Before I left to catch a few hours of sleep at home, I kissed his forehead and muttered, "sweetheart, this is barbaric...I'm so sorry."

Palliative care basically meant concealing the panic of death with drugs. Food and water were withheld until the body gave up. I was watching my beloved slowly drown with mucus filled lungs. His internal organs had no water or food to function. Bob slowly succumbed to his body's toxic build-up. I was angry but held my tongue. This was not humane.

Saturday the 7th of April was bath day, again. The few moments he was semi-conscious, he groaned loudly in pain. The nurses were very kind and spent time talking with me. I needed that. I had an incredible story to tell about Bob, and the tidbits I shared with the nurses left them dumbfounded. After Bob returned to his room and settled in, I found a soft sweet teddy bear had joined him. I made sure the nurses knew to leave the lights and TV on, plus the room door open. The war in Korea left him with night terrors and claustrophobia: something he didn't have as a boy working his dad's coal mine.

Sunday, I find Bob's breathing a lot worse. I stayed close to him, holding his hand or caressing his arm. I stayed until about 2 pm, then I told the nurses I was going home for a 'nibble and a nap' and that I'd be back this evening.

I woke after maybe 3 hours of sleep, fed the cats and myself and headed back to the VA. Dusk was coming on. I signed in at the nurse's station at 7:05. I walked into Bob's room loudly proclaiming, "Honey! I'm home!" I settled into the chair by his bed and took up his surprisingly cold limp hand. He was breathing slowly, a white frothy foam inside his mouth.

On the television was a continual loop of Canadian geese. “This is nice,” I said to Bob, “the geese on a mist filled pond.” The honking of the geese was so peaceful and soothing. Two nurses came in and stood on the other side of the bed. One nurse wisely asked, “How did you both meet?”

I took a deep breath while holding Bob’s cold hand and started to relay the story. I got to the part where I was being a pest by organizing his workshop; redoing the Riker mounts that held polished stone cabochons. “*I know how many there are!*” Bob had teased. “Yes, I know,” I had replied, “it’s not nice to steal!” Both nurses startled at that moment; I don’t know if it was from my story or from watching Bob’s reaction. “Go get my stethoscope from my locker,” one nurse said to the other. I kept blathering on as she listened to Bob’s chest. “He’s gone...” It was 7:10. “He waited for you....” she said.

I don’t recall crying right away. The nurses left me alone with Bob for as long as I wanted. I spoke softly to him as I found some hand lotion and gently massaged each calloused hand and knarly foot. I combed his soft wavy white hair, then kissed his forehead and whispered so long.

The nurse ladies began to clean and prepare Bob for transport - by the funeral home I secured earlier in the week. I slipped down to Bob’s Tundra to unload the items left in his room. The teddy bear is in the passenger seat next to me. I remember staring at the evening star as twilight silhouetted Thumb Butte. In April, the constellation Taurus was just setting in the West. Bob told me I would always find him watching over me, from the middle star of Orion’s belt.

When I returned to Bob’s room, he was stretched out serenely, a donated quilt tucked around him. I thanked the ladies and sat alone with my beloved, until the funeral home caretaker came to collect him.

I knew Bob was fearful of going to hell – for the horrid things the Korean War propelled him to do against his nature. Bob spent the rest of his life trying to ‘make up’ for the wrongs he committed. He was a scout leader, baseball coach and Santa Claus...sad substitutes for not being able to see his own children grow up.

My brief appearance in Bob’s life was like a wake-up call. He snapped back to life; long enough to share with me the horrors and sadness that tormented him. By allowing me to share in his burden, he was able to reflect on how remarkable his life truly was. *I was his last mission*, and from the immense love and sense of well-being I carry to this day, I say he succeeded.

I'm very blessed to have helped raise a successful, loving and supportive daughter. Crystal's efforts to help me see Bob buried were generous, sincere and heartfelt.

This man was a stranger to her. He caused her mom to divorce her father. Still, she could see how important and beloved he was to me. He somehow rejuvenated my soul before it lapsed into a coma. She helped me take him 'home'.

A funeral home is always accommodating... for a price. Six thousand dollars was the price tag to send Bob back to the Black Hills of South Dakota – the last place he was truly happy. Bob and I did not want embalming done. He rode the airlines surrounded by dry ice. We plan to be a sweet spot for worms.....

I took clothes to the funeral home, for Bob to be buried in. His Korean War cap, tan khaki pants, suspenders and a pumpkin orange shirt that said, 'Don't Worry, Be Hopi'. I filled his casket with many, many keepsakes. A naja necklace for Hopi elder, sweet grass, blue corn, sacred feather, abalone shell, tobacco. Plus, the ashes of his favorite dog, Pebbles. Also, family heirlooms: his mother's small medicine pot, his grandfather's lock of hair, the leather ghost shirt. Also tucked around Bob was an arrowhead he made, an obsidian crow head I made in his lapidary class, a small piece of Mexican Crazy Lace, his 'Optivisor' and rock hammer. As a shroud I covered Bob with an old US Army blanket.

The flight to South Dakota's Rapid City airport was plagued with delays and cancellations. Thank goodness for the tech savvy daughter! She secured seats on another airline to ensure our arrival, before Bob's scheduled burial at the Black Hills National Veteran's Cemetery.

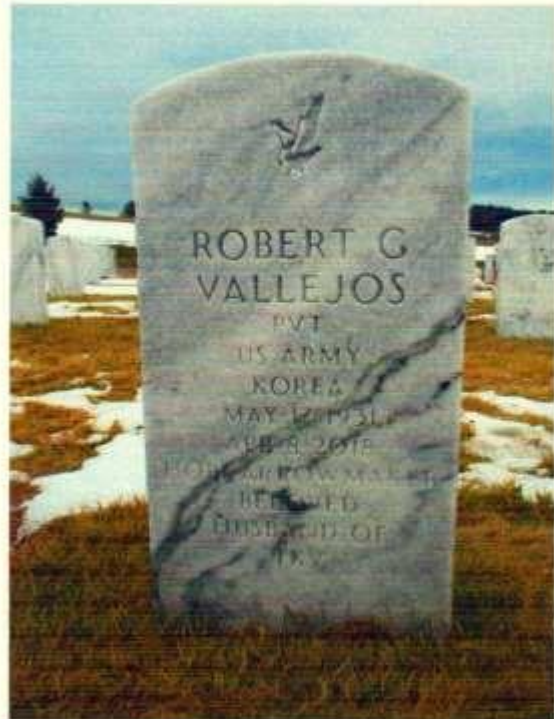
Flying into Rapid City was a dreary, solemn event. The sky was heavy and gray. The landscape was barren, with intermittent ridges of remaining snow. Looking out the port window, I could see the sacred Black Hills. The flight and landing were uneventful. We disembarked and my daughter went into rental car mode. I stood by the two bags of luggage we brought with us, feeling happy and sad all at once. We eventually exited the small terminal to find our rental car. The cold blustery wind made me shrug and shiver as I lugged my suitcase outdoors.

I immediately became aware of the honking of geese! I looked up to see a small group of Canadian geese flying away from us. They reeled and flew right back to us, barely a dozen feet over our heads! The lead goose had a feather missing from each wing. The little band of four geese flew off towards the south, honking loudly.

I knew it was Bobby! "You're here, you're here! I'm here!" I waved my arms after them and succumbed to tears.

Visions can have a strong, overwhelming impact. They link those living to the spirit world. This was not the first nor the last communication we shared. Bob and I maintain a connection that will never fade – never falter.

The burial of Bobby was brief, formal and solemn. I was warned by the funeral director back in Chino Valley that there would be a brief 30-minute ceremony: no more. Other people were waiting to be buried. Bless my daughter for recording the worst day of my life.



Bob and I will reside together in spot K-712.

The fantastic, polished honor guard, consisted of nine older men and a woman. As seven riflemen discharged 3 volleys into the air – I cringed and gasped. Then a lone soldier drew a long, deep breath and *blew taps for the last time*. I was beside myself as the Honor Guard carefully folded the American flag that draped Bob’s casket. I had no words to say – I said them all while Bob was living. The flag: which Bob sold his soul to was presented to me. I clutched it firmly. The cemetery director beckoned me to move on. More men (and women) were yet to be honored.

I plan to join Bobby someday. I am a veteran of the Vietnam era. A new headstone will be erected then, our information on opposite sides of the same stone. Our final rock – gray rock.

Daughter and I were lodged in Deadwood, SD. We roamed the empty streets, void of tourists in the middle of chilly April. The day looked less sad, as blue sky pushed aside the gray clouds. We stopped at one of the historic saloons that lined the main street of Deadwood. We were its only customers and shared a fancy pants drink or two. On the way back to the motel, I acquired a trinket that summed up my life with Bobby – “Love is not a matter of counting the years – but of making the years count.”

Before heading back to the airport terminal, daughter and I took a side trip to the ‘Crazy Horse Memorial’. (No, I didn’t want to see Mount Rushmore....) On the way there we passed the Visitors Center for the Pactola Forest Service District. There, in front of the Visitor’s Center sign was a grazing goose – another Bobby apparition. So, there I was walking where Bob walked, peering into the windows where he worked. Another of his stories come alive.

I could see now the purpose of my life. To bring this man’s horrid, hard life to a gentle, love filled close. To acknowledge his worth and meaning. To tell his story to his heartbroken children. To act as a liaison to his generations to come, who share the blood of a half-breed warrior – and Arrow Maker.

The End